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Advice

Trainhopping 101 - Finding Your Train (self.vagabond)

submitted 29 days ago * by [huckstah](#) [Trainhopper / Hitchhiker](#)

First of all, let me state this:

No one is going to spoon-feed you particular information about finding a specific train in a specific town/city. That information is heavily guarded within the train-hopping community, and that information is NOT allowed at r/Vagabond.

Most train-hopping secrets are things that must be LEARNED on the rails. This can either be done by yourself, or from information shared by other train-hoppers. Usually it comes along as a mix of both. This is how it's been for over a hundred years of trainhopping history, and no one at [/r/Vagabond](#) or [SquatthePlanet.com](#) is going to change that just for YOU.

EXAMPLE: If your post or comment is titled: "HEY GUISE, MY LIFE IN DALLAS SUCKS! WHICH TRAIN DO I HOP OUT OF HERE ON?", then don't expect that an actual train-hopper is going to

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An online community created by vagabonds, for vagabonds:

answer you with any in-depth or serious advice. Sorry, but that's just not how it works with our subculture.

However, there will be enough information in this post (including the other sidebar articles) for you to actually STUDY this information and use it to prepare yourself for living life on the rails. Face it, if you don't bother studying and actually working to learn this on your own, we are certainly not going to take you seriously or help you out in specific ways.

Furthermore, train-hopping is not a weekend SPORT for thrill-seekers. Train-hopping is a LIFESTYLE for homeless travelers. If you are new to being homeless, I suggest starting out with hitchhiking, and later learning train-hopping on the road from other train-hoppers.

If you are NOT homeless, it's simply up to you to figure out trainhopping by yourself. Once again, this is a lifestyle, not a hobby. If you are seeking adventure, or simply planning to hit the road for the first time, there are far safer and much easier alternatives as opposed to train-hopping.

(Side-note Concerning Weekend Warriors/ Part-time Train-Hoppers: Although few and far between, there are part-time train-hoppers that simply do this for thrill/adventure/experience. HOWEVER, most of these riders are railfans and train-culture enthusiasts that have been studying trains and train-yards for many, many, many years. They are not teenagers simply going for their first thrill-ride, and they are not greenhorns on their first rodeo. This is what separates them from the dozens of oogles and greenhorns that get killed each year. If you are not a hardcore

Vagabonds, Hobos, Hitchhikers, Trainhoppers, Squatters, Rubbertramps, Backpackers, and more.

Feel free to share stories and pictures about your adventures on the road, or share advice and tips with greenhorns and lurkers!

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and knowledgeable railfan, do NOT train-hop for a weekend thrill-ride, PERIOD!*)

MOVING FORWARD: How to Find a Train!

Having said that prior warning, let's assume you are ready to study the rails seriously.

I'll go over a few basic, but IMPORTANT, tips that will help you figure out how a train-yard works, and give you a general idea of where to find your train. Most train-yard information is publicly available online to railfans and foamers, and some of it can be logically figured out by merely using Google Maps.

These examples I am about to use are by no means an "exact" guide to finding specific trains in specific yards. Every yard is different, and so are their schedules. However, most yards do work in similar basic patterns, and understanding these patterns will help you get a better understanding of where to generally find your train. We will use one specific, and very simple train-yard for all the following pictures/examples in this post.

First, here is a Google non-terrain map showing the basic layout of a simple train-yard:

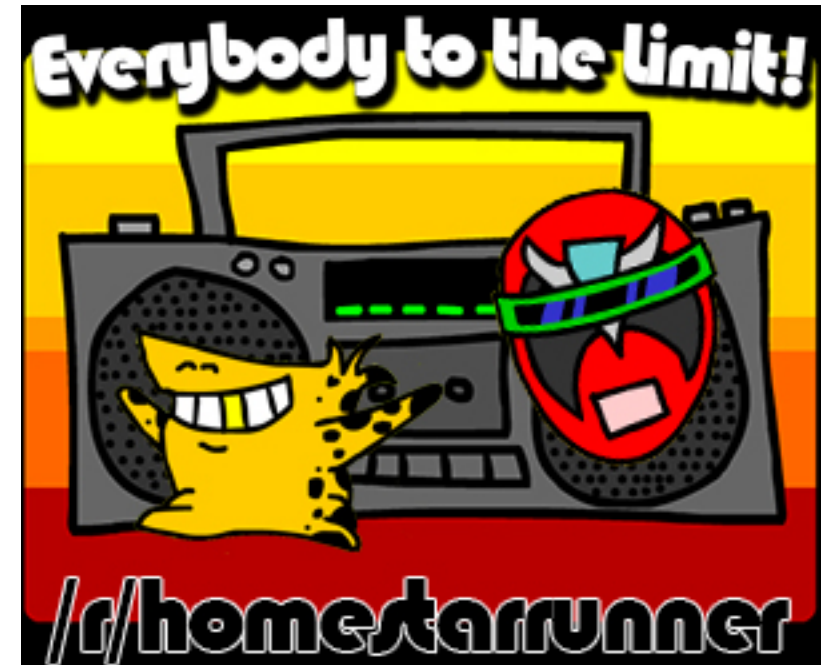
Map 1 - Simple Yard Layout

As you can see, this yard is divided into two sections. One section is where they classify cars, and the other section is for the cars awaiting departure.

In the **classification yard**, there are a few classification tracks designated for organizing and "humping" cars together that are waiting to leave the yard for a future time/date. This is a very

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DANGEROUS section of the yard, where cars will be entering and exiting without any warning at all. Always AVOID this part of the yard, as this is NOT the place to wait for a departing train, and even worse, it is usually swarming with security personnel (bulls) and workers.

The classification yard is also usually closer to the office buildings, main tower, and much more camera surveillance. If there is any spot in the yard to guarantee being spotted and reported, the classification yard is that spot. Avoid it at all costs.

(Side-note: Workers in the classification yard are usually extremely busy, and they don't have the time/patience to tell a hobo when the next train is coming. Some of them won't even know anyway, so don't even bother. They are also more likely to report you, as opposed to other workers in other sections of yard. TL;DR: Always avoid the Classification yard!)

However, in the **departure yard**, cars will be lined up for final departure. This is the section of the yard you want to mostly focus on.

Train-cars that were formerly sitting in the classification yard will eventually go to the departure yard, in order to be hooked up with a string of cars awaiting soon departure. Once again, trains will be constantly moving back and forth in this area. Work engines will be "working" each strong of cars, usually coupling/uncoupling cars, and hooking coupled cars up to their designated strings and engines.

You will also see a few workers here checking the brakes and lines on each car, and attaching the rear signal light (FRED Light)

to the rear car of the train, so lay low and be respectful! Workers will arrive in the departure yard are on foot, four-wheelers, golf-carts, or trucks. Be prepared, stay low, and be respectful, and these workers will often let you slide without reporting you to the bull.

(Side-note: Workers in the departure yard are usually busy, but they MIGHT have a few seconds/minutes to give you a quick tip on schedules and destinations. Make a respectful presence, make your question direct, and thank them whether they help you or not. Workers on these main lines usually know exactly when trains are arriving/departing, as opposed to workers in other areas of the yard)

Also, in the departure yard, there will usually be TWO main clearance lines, known as the main lines. These two tracks are generally the two outermost tracks on the main yard, such as shown here:

Map 2 - Main Lines

The two main line tracks are generally used for trains that are NOT stopping in the yard, as these trains will be rolling through with full clearance. Trains coming into a yard on these lines are USUALLY (not always!) rolling through very slow, often slow enough to catch while the train is still moving. Often times, trains will actually stop and side-out on these main lines a few hundred meters before entering a train-yard, or inside the yard itself, so that it can wait for another train to pass by first.

In order to catch a train on the main-lines, you'll need to find a patch of woods/trees/obstacles to hide behind. Try to keep a very

LOW profile, as these spots are usually in the middle of the yard, or very close to the yard. When your train rolls through or stops to swap crews, make a quick dash to the car you plan to hop. Only hop the main-line at night, or you will be surely exposed by workers, bulls, and security cameras.

Main Line Warning: If a train is sitting still on the main-lines, ninety-percent of the time there will be a conductor and engineer sitting in the front units. Do NOT let these drivers see you, or you will probably be reported to railroad police.

However, you can get around this by walking down and hopping a car that is 20+ cars behind the front engines. Preferably, try to find a car that is atleast 100+ meters behind the front engines, so that the conductor/engineers can't see you hopping on.

In addition to watching out for the conductors/engineers, this is the exact moment you want to keep out a watchful eye for the bull (security guard).

If a bull is on active patrol in the yard, they usually only check trains that are getting ready for departure, or sitting on the main lines. There will likely be an access road, usually a gravel/dirt road, that will follow along the main lines. That's the road the bull will be using as they drive down the string of cars looking for hobos.

When you hop a train that's on the main lines, always STAY LOW. Stash your bags in the grainer holes or behind a cross bar, and lay down flat until your train leaves the yard. The moment you feel brave enough to sit/stand up will likely be the very moment that a worker or security guard spots you, so always LAY LOW until that

train is completely out of the yard.

Often times when you arrive at a train-yard, there will be no convenient train magically waiting for you on the main-lines. Ninety-nine percent of train-hopping is WAITING. If you're an impatient person that doesn't like sitting for long periods of times and watching trains, you're probably going to hate this lifestyle, and you would be much better off hitchhiking.

After accepting the fact that you will be doing alot of waiting, you need to figure out WHERE to actually wait. You want to consider two primary factors when waiting for a train:

- **Staying hidden:**

If you're going to be waiting several hours for a train, it's only a matter of time before a worker or bull will drive by and spot you, unless you are well-hidden. Never sit out in the open, and more importantly, NEVER enter the yard!

Train yards are usually in remote rural areas outside of the inner-city, or in a desolated area, and there are ALWAYS places to hide on the outskirts of the yard.

Here is an example of where to hide for eastbound and westbound trains:

Map 3 - Terrain Hideouts

As you can see, there are two hangouts for this yard. The hangout for Westbound (WBD) trains are obviously at the west end of the yard, and the hangout for Eastbound (EBD) trains is at the east end of the yard. Note that both spots are in a small patch of woods/trees that you can easily hide in, or even camp down for

a night or two.

When looking for a place to hide/camp while waiting for your train, always look for patches of woods, trees, bushes, tall grass, small buildings, etc.

More importantly, you can see that both these hangouts are OUTSIDE of the overall train yard, making it less likely that a worker or bull will spot you. Once again, NEVER go into the main departure yard, especially the classification yard.

- **Spot to Hop:**

Eastbounds will usually stop at the east end of the yard before actually joining the main lines for final departure, and vice-versa for Westbounds. If those trains do not completely stop, there is a 99% chance they will be rolling slow enough (less than 8 mph) to catch out on the fly. Of course, this is all according to how heavy your pack is, how physically fit you are, and the terrain you are running on.

Map 4 - Departure Spots

As a final note, keep in mind that not all train-yards are this simple. Furthermore, there is usually more than one train-yard in a particular city. Which direction you are trying to go will determine which specific train-yard you want to go to.

For example:

If the direction of the rails you are going down east is owned by Union Pacific, then go to the Union Pacific yard. If the direction you are going west is on then rails owned by BNSF, go to the local BNSF yard.

You can google these yards easily by simply running a google search for "Union Pacific Yard New Orleans Louisiana" or "BNSF Yard New Orleans Louisiana".

If you don't know which railroad company owns which rails, [DOWNLOAD THE MAPS](#) on the sidebar! These maps indicate which direction tracks are going, and more importantly, which railroad company owns those tracks!

The rest of the information is up to YOU to find. Train-hoppers on [/r/Vagabond](#) or SquatthePlanet.com are NOT going to spoon-feed you secret information that has been protected for over 100 years, Also, [/r/Vagabond](#) is not a place where we train-hoppers are going to answer questions like "Hey guise! Help! Where do I find a train in Dallas?!?"...

We are not Oogle Customer Support. We are train-hoppers. If we give you advice, take advantage of it. If we don't, understand that we have a lifestyle to protect, and we would likely be more than happy to actually teach you in REAL life.

Furthermore, none of us started off with any of the information that is available to you on our sidebar. There are detailed maps for you to download/print, there are articles telling you which cars are safe to hop, articles telling you which gear you will need, and tons of other information that was never available to most of us when we hopped our first train. Take advantage of that, and learn from it.

If you can't figure out how to get your feet wet after studying all of the information provided on the sidebar, perhaps you should try hitchhiking for a few weeks/months and wait until you meet a train-

hopper that can teach you in real life. That's your best bet, period.

Once again, all of this information can be found publicly, either through railfan forums or google maps. I have simply compiled this post for those that are actually willing to study and learn, and therefore earn their way towards hopping trains.

More importantly, always maintain safety and respect on the railroad. When approaching or talking to a railroad worker, always be respectful, know the lingo, stay out of his way, and let him get back to work. When you jump onto a car, hold on tight and maintain 3 points of contact at all times. Slack is a motherfucker.

Ride Safe!

13 comments share

All 13 Comments

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[-] **terriblemothra** Retired Traveler/Trainhopper 18 points 28 days ago

A few notes on safety. Always maintain three points of contact (two feet, one hand or vice-versa) when on the train. The train will snap and jerk randomly with enough force to knock you off. Saw that one happen myself. We were going slow enough that he was okay but fast enough he couldn't catch up. Had to throw his pack off but we couldn't toss his dog as we were going too fast. Never saw him again :(

Secondly, and probably the most important, the part between the trains where they physically connect is called the knuckle. NEVER EVER TOUCH IT. The knuckle will clench and unclench unexpectedly with enough force to rip your foot off your leg.

My personal rule for hopping on the fly which has always served me well was if I cannot count the bolts on the wheels of the train then it's moving too fast to hop on. Then again, I had a dog and a huge pack so YMMV.

[permalink](#)



[–] **pagandroid** Trainhopper 6 points 28 days ago

upvote for the 3 points of contact. be safe guys!

[permalink](#) [parent](#)



[–] **huckstah** Trainhopper / Hitchhiker S 6 points 28 days ago

Yep, slack is a hobo's worst nightmare.

[permalink](#) [parent](#)



[–] **pagandroid** Trainhopper 7 points 28 days ago

dude, i fell of in vegas even WITH three points of contact... buckled hard and flew of the IM and ate it tough, lucky-to-be-alive tough. don't fuck around kids.

[permalink](#) [parent](#)



[–] **Frightened_Peasant** 1 point 22 days ago

What happened to his dog?

[permalink](#) [parent](#)



[–] **terriblemothra** Retired Traveler/Trainhopper 2 points 22 days ago

It all happened suddenly. I was doing something when the dog started barking up a storm. By the time I looked he was already on the ground behind us. He lay face down in the gravel for a second before he started to get up. We were already a good distance away and gaining speed.

Tossing his pack was the easy thing. My road dog and I grabbed it and chucked it out lickety-split. The dog however, you wouldn't have been able to get me to jump off the train at that speed onto rocks and concrete. We stood there for a second, exposed to the bulls and workers. When our eyes met we both knew the moment had passed. We laid down and hid, my road dog holding the guy's dog down to keep it from jumping.

We both had animals of our own so we had enough to feed and water the dog. But it was miserable the whole ride. Neither of us knew the owner well, we had met him at a circle not even 48 hours prior. Now we had his dog. And we didn't want the dog.

By the time we arrived in El Paso we had made up our minds. Our journey had started in Berkeley and our

slated destination was Ocala, FL for the Rainbow Gathering. This kid wasn't headed there, he was headed for Slab City. We agreed that we would try to find some traveling kid to give the dog to but El Paso was completely empty of travelers. All we could find was a bunch of broken down humbums and ex-hoppers beneath the Cotton Street bridge. We ended up giving the dog to an ex-hopper who wouldn't stop talking about FTTRA. He seemed alright.

[permalink](#) [parent](#)



[-] **willthisworkforyou** [Trainhopper / Hitchhiker](#) 11 points 28 days ago*

honestly, this is pretty much all you need to ride trains. this is like 80%, the rest comes with experience. assuming you are a self reliant person of course.

[permalink](#)



[-] **React420** 3 points 28 days ago

Thank-you Huck, this is great information and advice!

[permalink](#)



[-] **jack_o_all_trades** 3 points 28 days ago

Train hopping is something on my bucket list but something I probably won't get a chance to cross off.

Here in Melbourne Australia, I see the same type of train depart 1 - 2 afternoons each week with big thick tubes of reflective metal. I assume it is actually rolled up metal sheet. There us only a small number per train car.

[permalink](#)



[-] **CXR1037** 3 points 28 days ago

Trainhopping is not a weekend sport for thrill-seekers

It is if you're enrolled in school full-time and work part-time! :D

Anyway, looking through this I have a few comments. First: is the first map you show correct? 3 classification tracks seems really small. Either that's a dinky little yard or Maps isn't accurately showing all tracks. Usually, classification takes up the bulk of yards (at least big yards). Take [Roseville](#), for example (L-R: Receiving, Hump/Classification, Departure [right, Engineer Lupo?]).

In the classification yard, they organize and "hump" cars together

Technically not all classification yards are hump yards. While I agree they're all dangerous, I think hump yards are especially scary (for those who don't know: [here](#)). I recall sitting on a reefer in Roseville once watching cars get pushed over the hump in the fog. Suddenly and quietly an outline of a railcar appeared, then disappeared back into the fog, followed by the crash of it hitting whatever string of cars was in front of it.

In the main yard, cars will be lined up for final departure.

I think the terminology here is worth pointing out. Asking a worker where the "main yard" is might get you a confused look at best, a visit from the bull at worst. In my time spent around trains, they're usually never called out like that. You'll hear something like "RVB on 202", and unless you have a yard map with you, good luck figuring out where track 202 is.

It's like you said, too: all yards are different. West Colton, for example, is straightforward, but look again at the Roseville image...do you feel confident finding the departure yard there?

All in all a pretty good primer. Also good on you

[permalink](#)



[–] **huckstah** Trainhopper / Hitchhiker S 3 points 28 days ago*

I used this small yard as a very simple example, mostly for the sake of not confusing people with the larger and more intimidating yards. Plus it's a yard I recently rolled through, so I figured I'd use a yard that I can personally vouch for. Showing a greenhorn a map of Roseville would probably just confuse the hell out of them, really.

As far as terminology, learning when to spot whether the classification yards have humps or remote units or whatever is something they'll have to figure out a few weeks/months ahead after catching out on their own. If I wrote a book about this, I would have definitely put a section on hump yards, and even repair yards for that matter.

[permalink](#) [parent](#)



[–] **president-nixon** 1 point 28 days ago

none of us started off with the info in the sidebar

Out of curiosity, huckstah, how'd you get your start riding the rails? Thanks for all the info man.

[permalink](#)



[–] [huckstah](#) [Trainhopper / Hitchhiker](#) [S](#) 4 points 28 days ago*

I started off on the wrong train that took me the wrong way. Thought I was going South, and then 10 miles later the train switched to an Eastbound track and took me 150 miles the wrong way.

Finally I met a guy in the trainyard that had been hopping freight for 5-6 years. He showed me how yards work, how to identify different units, the usefulness of rail maps, tonnage maps, etc. Even after that, I still made a few mistakes that just have to be learned personally on the rails.

There's a pretty big learning curve at first, and it can be a bit intimidating. But once you get over that curve, things just sort of come naturally. You can suddenly look at a yard and within 5 minutes have most things figured out, and be able to see a train that's being prepped for departure. For some people, it takes several months to get over that learning curve, even years. For others, it may take a few weeks or just a couple of months.

All in all, no matter how long you do this, or how much you *think* you know, you will make mistakes. Train schedules change, cars get split off to various drop-offs, etc etc.

If anyone ever tells you they are 100% sure about every single train, they're likely full of shit. There is a lot of "*traincore ego*" out there, as I like to call it. Just ignore the know-it-all types and learn from people that are more modest and honest about the lifestyle. Bullshitters and traincore egotists will get you killed just as quick as oogles or greenhorns.

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